

# The audience strikes back

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The nationally organized and publicized demonstrations against CRUISING and WINDOWS, and a wide variety of other active political responses to the shooting and screening of Hollywood films, demonstrate that many people are no longer willing to tolerate offensive and derogatory images of themselves in the name of entertainment.

There are many different ways in which people have protested specific films or have organized around issues raised by films. We want to encourage people to look for and carry out political activism around film: from booing at sexist and racist scenes and leafleting outside theaters for a variety of political causes to people chaining their wheelchairs (with them in them) across the front of a theater to protest the use of non-handicapped actors in COMING HOME and showing the film in a theater inaccessible to wheelchairs (report in JC #18). The following examples, chosen to show the variety of actions, are models of different political tactics. JUMP CUT hopes to continue to report on such organizing efforts.

### *DONA FLOR AND HER TWO HUSBANDS*

Laura X of Berkeley's Women's History Research Center protested against the Brazilian film DONA FLOR AND HER TWO HUSBANDS at UC Berkeley. Unifilm's "Programmer's Guide to Third World Cinema" describes the film as a

"lively and erotic comedy about a young Brazilian woman who remarries when her husband dies, only to have the ghost of her first husband come back to haunt and sexually tempt her. One of the most popular, crowd-pleasing Brazilian films ever made."

However, Laura X, outraged by its sexism and racism when she saw it earlier in New York, decided to protest the film's screening in Berkeley.

The leaflet she distributed read in part:

"The clear and present dangerous message of the film is the idea that whatever degradation a man lays on his wife - beating her, stealing her money to drink and gamble, coming on to every woman in town, including her students - she will still love him if he's good in bed (when he has anything left for her!)."

"She may well love him, in the traditional self-sacrificing sense. This may be part of the trap for her (because we're taught that if we just love men enough we can tame the beast in them. So we believe it when people tell us their violence is our fault!!!!)."

"Her homebody second husband is made so goodie-goodie to show that this is the only alternative to a virile wife-beater, i.e., boredom!"

"What seems to be Flor's split personality and "sexual liberation is really the typical Victorian male mind/body split where the wife is up on a pedestal and his passions go to mistresses/prostitutes. In Latin terms women are only allowed to be Madonnas or whores."

"I ran out of the film shaking from its all-too-real depiction of our dilemma, saying 'ohhh, how we need a women's movement. So that they can't get away with these rigid dehumanizing roles.'"

- Laura X, March 4, 1979

Laura X's protest was important in validating the feelings of isolated women in the audience who perceived the same thing, and in educating the audience. But group protest is even more effective.

### *BOULEVARD NIGHTS*

When *BOULEVARD NIGHTS*, a feature film made about Chicano youth in Los Angeles, was being filmed, the L.A. Chicano community generally supported it. Although Anglos produced and directed the film, they hired Chicano actors and actresses for the leading roles. However, when the film was finished, its sensationalism was obvious. As a result, La Raza groups throughout California protested and leafleted many screenings, especially in their own communities. The following statement was released by the Chicano Cinema Coalition (L.A.) after its members previewed the film:

"The Chicano Cinema Coalition finds the film *BOULEVARD NIGHTS* objectionable in its portrayal of Chicanos for the following reasons:

"1. The film makes no effort to explore the underlying social and economic causes which create the gang' phenomenon. Rather than identifying American society's inability to address long-standing social and economic discrimination in the Chicano barrio, the film attempts to

blame the victim for these problems, saying, in effect, that gangs exist because they want to or because they cannot help it. Gang members are depicted, on the whole, as mindless, drunken and lacking in the will or ability to act responsibly.

2. The film is nihilistic. It argues that there are no solutions or options available to the gang member in his efforts to remove himself from the gang experience

3. By concentrating only on the gang experience, which represents only a small percentage of the Chicano population, the film reinforces the stereotype that all Chicanos are gang members. The film leaves virtually untouched the rich and positive side of Chicano family life, and of the humanistic and loving attitudes which the majority of Chicanos share.

4. We must emphasize that we are not critical of Chicano or Latino actors and actresses in the film. We commend the fine acting by Richard Yniguez, Danny de la Paz, Marta Du Bois, and others and consider this acting the film's only redeeming social value. We address ourselves, instead, to producers, writers, directors, and distributors. The producers of the film displayed awareness in casting Chicano and Latino actors. But it must not stop there. Producers have the responsibility to present role models other than mindless, violent gang members, passive mothers, or drug-crazed delinquents.

5. When a medium refuses to deal with its subject matter in depth, treating only the sensational elements such as violence, we must properly identify the action as exploitative."

## ***CRUISING***

During the summer of 1979 the filming of William Friedkin's new film CRUISING became a focus of protest for the New York City gay community. CRUISING is the story of a New York City cop (Al Pacino) who is investigating the murder and mutilation of gay men by a homophobic psychopath. In the course of his undercover investigation, Pacino becomes transformed into a killer himself. A portion of the statement published by the Lesbian and Gay Male Caucuses of the U.S. Alternative Cinema Conference makes the homophobia of the film and the issues surrounding the protests clear:

"It should be apparent to all that we have the right under the First Amendment to protest the making of this film. Our rights include encouraging others to withdraw support from this film, which depicts the systematic stabbing and castration of Gay men."

"Because Gays have been subject for so long to an informal system of censorship, we are surprised at the sudden concern about this issue. Producing a Gay film, promoting a reasonable Gay film image, or acting

as an openly Gay crew member has been a difficult enterprise. Moviegoing for American Gays has been a view of exclusion, humiliation, and violence."

"And it is violence that is such a fearful fact of life for most Gays. The frequent and vicious attacks against Gay men and women throughout the U.S. are largely unrecognized by most non-Gays."

"We believe the film CRUISING will provide an impetus for continued violence, a blueprint for more murders. We fear for our own lives and the lives of Gay women and men across the country."

By now the course and scope of the protest against the film is well known. Once the film's story became known, the New York gay community began to militantly disrupt the shooting in all sorts of inventive ways: Hanging protest signs and banners at locations, using stereos, whistles, and mirrors to disrupt sound takes and camera work, and encouraging gay extras to quit. Disrupting the film's production, thus costing the producers money, worked as a form of economic boycott. The strength and political importance of the protest was in its organization - sustained over a considerable period of time and involving as many as 1,200 protestors. The protests against the film in the form of picketing the theaters continued after its release. Although these protests were not as well organized or successful as many gay activists had hoped, they did make their point and the film has not done well at the box office.

## WINDOWS

Another case in point is WINDOWS, a film that portrays a lesbian who falls in love with a straight woman and who then hires a man to rape the other woman so the straight woman will turn against men. The rape is shown in violent and explicit detail.

United Artists (who also made CRUISING and perhaps because of their experience with that film) kept the filming of WINDOWS, which they call a "romantic thriller," so quiet that few people heard of it until just before it was released. However, through the concentrated efforts of gay and feminist coalitions in several areas of the country, WINDOWS opened to generally short, unsuccessful runs.

Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media (WAVPAM), the San Francisco-based group organizing the boycott in Northern California, supported by a wide spectrum of community groups, expected to be able to produce large numbers of volunteers to picket the theaters showing the film. After a pre-opening demonstration in front of a Transamerica (United Artists' parent company) executive's home in the posh Pacific Heights area of San Francisco, it was announced that WINDOWS would not open in Northern California. Transamerica gave

uncharacteristic credit to the looming protest and "made a purely economic decision" that the film should not be shown. WAVPAM wants to continue to fight on this economic level until this kind of homophobic and sexist film will not even be produced, much less distributed. They do not see First Amendment issues involved because the tactic of informational picketing urging a boycott does not stop anyone from entering the theater. They feel that sensationalizing violence against women and portraying homosexuals as psychotic killers dangerously hampers the civil rights of women and gays see Carol Lease's "Pornography: Exploitation, Not Civil Rights" in JUMP CUT 12/13).

The film's threat is multi-layered. Besides exploiting the titillating aspects of a violent on-screen sexual assault against a woman, another woman is blamed for it. If fact a woman, a lesbian, actually "gets off" on violence against another woman: as if women like to perpetuate violence against each other. Once again the victims are responsible for the violence men perpetrate against women. The myth that lesbianism is a sick reaction to mistreatment by men and not a free choice to love women is supported in the film, thereby dividing the women's movement along the lines of sexual preference. The film uses the common homophobic scare tactic that gays are constantly looking for ways to lure unsuspecting straights by whatever means necessary into their "malignant" lifestyle. And there is always the suggestion that women who break out of traditional roles are risking a horrible fate.

The film opened in New York on January 18 in several theaters with hundreds of people demonstrating in the rain and distributing leaflets with the plot synopsis and a statement of protest against the film signed by the groups involved. Apparently, these protests were successful, for WINDOWS closed in New York after a short run.

Unfortunately, the mainstream press again refused to deal with the political issues of the film's release. Many reviewers described the film in sexist terms, Andrew Sarris couldn't understand why the attractive Elizabeth Ashley would be interested in the dowdy Talia Shire character in the first place (what could a "dish" like Ashley see in a "saucepan" like Shire). Perhaps, he suggested, if a blond, beautiful model type had played the part.... Others simply dismissed the film because of its banal script and unskilled direction.

Because Hollywood will probably continue to respond to the women's and homosexual rights movements by exploiting people's fears and hatreds, the tactic of economic boycott used against WINDOWS will hopefully slow down production of anti-women and anti-gay films.

## **New developments**

In San Francisco recently, the Chinese community responded angrily when the script for a new Charlie Chan movie was presented to them at

a meeting between the producers and 70 interested people. Under the threat of major disruptions in the narrow streets of Chinatown and merchants' withdrawal of permission to film in front of their businesses and at the Chinatown gates, American Cinema Productions cancelled filming in Chinatown (because of "physical confrontation potential," they said). However, the movie is still being shot in San Francisco and a broad coalition of groups from the Chinese community has formed C.A.N. CHARLIE CHAN whose tactics so far have included picketing at shooting locations and protests to the mayor for allowing the filming. They hope to form a national organization to increase awareness of the film's racist stereotyping and the portrayal of Asian characters by white actors in CHARLIE CHAN - and to continue the protest once the film is released.

In the South Bronx, local residents are suing the producers of FORT APACHE, THE BRONX for providing "ideological justification for the neglect of the South Bronx by the rest of society," and encouraging "police violence and judicial inequality toward the plaintiffs and the classes they represent." The groups from the Puerto Rican community and their attorney, William Kunstler, are asking for a billion dollars in damages if the film comes out and one hundred million if it doesn't.

THE BRONX has been added to the title of the film to distinguish it from John Ford's 1948 cavalry versus the Indians film. But the racist implications are clear. The police of the South Bronx call the 41st Precinct station house Fort Apache because they feel isolated in hostile territory; others call it the little house on the prairie because the rest of the block lies in ruins.

Liberal star Paul Newman and liberal producer David Susskind appeared to be surprised by the community's reaction to the script when they presented it to a parents' organization in order to facilitate the filming. Linking sex and violence once again, the film portrays a Black hooker who kills her clients with a razor. Newman plays a tough Anglo cop who becomes involved with a Puerto Rican nurse while he is investigating the murders. She is supposed to represent the community's finer instincts, yet she is the only character in the film without a name and she dies of an overdose in the end. A highlight of the script has the precinct commander referring to the people as "animals" for not appreciating police help. In FORT APACHE, THE BRONX, the Puerto Ricans are responsible for the devastation of the area and the police are their victims.

Besides the suit, the angry community is protesting at production sites, and recently Newman was surprised to find his car surrounded by demonstrators when he arrived on the set. At the same time, the producers continue to insist that there is local support for the film, even though they have been unable to cite specific groups and have been

accused of bribing local high school students to play hooky and demonstrate in favor of the film.

## **First Amendment rights to the highest bidder**

People often believe or even fear that the high visibility and press coverage created by protests will generate free publicity for a "controversial" film. While this is certainly true, such protests offer the possibility of raising significant political issues to the level of public debate, organizing substantial numbers of people around issues of immediate importance and relevance to them, and setting up a new relationship between people and film. The potential possibility of mobilizing people for political action outweighs the possible additional publicity a film will get. People who do go to the film will see the film with a different consciousness than had the protest never existed.

Often liberals raise the issue of "free speech" and artistic freedom. On the surface, this sounds like a good argument. Certainly radicals know enough about censorship to not want it imposed on them. But "free speech" is most often raised to protect the rights of those who can pay to express their views: newspaper publishers, Hollywood filmmakers, Network TV, rightwing politicians and their followers - all those who buy the right to defend or perhaps even criticize the status quo from within it. "Free speech" does not extend to people who don't have the means to express themselves through the existing and expensive bourgeois channels and who must therefore resort to other means of expression: leafleting, picketing, rallying, and marching. Capitalists interfere in the market place all the time; that is called competition and free enterprise. When UA spends millions on a viciously homophobic film, shouldn't people also be free to interrupt the film's movement through the market place on its way to profit?

Hollywood filmmakers and their defenders usually say their films aren't political, just harmless entertainment. But all films are ideological. When people protest against films, they need to take the issue of entertainment seriously. Film reviewers often sidestep the issue of the interrelationship of politics and entertainment by saying that the films in question are aesthetically poor and that therefore people shouldn't get all excited about them. But the point isn't whether or not these films are good or bad aesthetically or technically, but that they demean people, that they take the power/violence relations in our society and turn them on their head in the classic blame-the-victim way. Gays are portrayed as psychotic murderers rather than victims of police brutality and murder. Women characters encourage rapists and sadists rather than being shown as the victims of patriarchal violence: wife beating, rape, and murder. All this in the name of freedom, art, and entertainment.

Even if these protests cannot immediately change the way Hollywood portrays us, they are important as a way of organizing people to take

political action in their own interests and because they provide very valuable lessons about the film industry and the society we live in.

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[To top](#)    [Current issue](#)    [Archived essays](#)    [Jump Cut home](#)